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SPEECH FOR THE HONOURABLE
MARTIN CAUCHON,
MINISTER OF JUSTICE AND ATTORNEY GENERAL OF CANADA

NATIONAL VICTIMS CONFERENCE

3 NOVEMBER 2003
OTTAWA, ONTARIO

Thank you, Catherine, for your kind introduction.

Ladies and gentlemen, Minister Easter, Mr. Glen, it is my pleasure to welcome you to Ottawa for the first National Victims of Crime Conference, hosted by the Department of Justice. I would like to thank all of you who worked so hard to make this event happen-you have done a wonderful job.

I would also like to thank those of you who travelled here from all across Canada-you have made this a truly "national" conference, the first of its kind in Canada.

The subject of this conference is one of great importance and one that triggers strong emotions. I am pleased to see such a large number of people here who are actively involved in raising awareness about the problems encountered by victims of crime. As you all know, no one asks to be a victim. The pain, fear, and anger experienced by victims can last a lifetime, not only for the victims but also for their families and friends.

Despite our crime prevention efforts, our laws, and effective law enforcement, the reality is that crimes will be committed and people will suffer. While we continue to target crime, we must also address the needs of victims who become unwilling participants in the criminal justice system. The justice system needs the cooperation of victims of crime-without them the system would not work.

Unfortunately, this can result in victims re-living their trauma. Many feel they are forgotten-I understand why victims hold this view. But many people-in both government and non-governmental organisations are striving to change this and to recognise the role of the victim.

As you know, this desire to bring about change began many years ago.

It was twenty years ago, in fact, that the Federal-Provincial Task Force on Justice for Victims of Crime delivered their report to Federal-Provincial Ministers of Justice. This report contained 79 recommendations that became the catalyst for law reform and the development of victim services.

Throughout the 90s, my government has pursued this law reform agenda and the concerns of victims of crime have been at the forefront. Examples include privacy protections for sexual assault victims to ensure against the indiscriminate production and use of their personal records, amendments to protect children from sex tourism and child prostitution, and protections against criminal harassment.

Another milestone was reached in 1998, when the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights examined the role of victims in the justice system and tabled their report, *Victims Rights-A Voice, not a Veto*. The Government of Canada responded to the report with a broader strategy, which included law reform, consultation, raising public awareness, and establishing the Policy

Centre for Victim Issues.

Many victims and victim advocates shared their stories with the Task Force and the Standing Committee, as well as with my predecessors and my officials over the years. They have been part of the evolution of the criminal justice system, and progress continues to be made. It is my hope that this conference will help us to further increase the visibility of victims' issues.

One of the ways we are continuing to improve the experience of victims is through law reform. The *Criminal Code* has been amended many times to facilitate the participation of victims and witnesses and to protect their privacy and safety.

The most recent example is Bill C-20, an act that aims to protect children and other vulnerable persons. The bill reforms our laws related to child pornography and the exploitation of children. It also expands the *Criminal Code* provisions that make it easier for young victims and witnesses to participate in criminal proceedings. Young persons up to eighteen years of age will benefit from testimonial aids-such as the use of screens, closed-circuit TV, and a support person-when providing testimony. The protections against personal cross-examination by a self-represented accused will also be strengthened. In addition, adult witnesses who need these testimonial aids may request their use.

With the passage of this legislation, Canada will have some of the strongest protections for victims and witnesses in the world.

In addition, my colleague Minister Easter and I, have been working on legislation to create a sex-offender registry, which will provide Canadian police with an effective and efficient tool to rapidly locate known offenders in their investigation of sex offences. We are also committed to amending the *DNA Act* to improve the investigation of crime, as well as adding a missing persons index.

But we all know that law reform alone is not enough.

The Policy Centre for Victim Issues is coordinating a comprehensive federal strategy to improve the experience of victims, to raise awareness about victim's issues and to share information with victims and their families about the justice system and their role in it.

It is that strategy that brings us here today. I am enormously proud of the work the Centre has done over the past few years; I can assure you that the men and women working on this file at the Department of Justice are deeply committed to raising awareness of victim's issues and to consulting broadly with stakeholders.

Of course, the responsibility for the criminal justice system in Canada is shared, and the provinces play a key role in the administration of justice. Because we all share the responsibility, we must all work together if we are to effectively respond to the concerns of victims. I am pleased to report that this has been a priority at our federal-provincial/territorial meetings of Ministers responsible for justice.

At our most recent meeting last month, all Ministers renewed the commitment to a new Canadian Statement of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime. The new Statement recognises that we all share the responsibility and obligation to improve the experience of the victim in the criminal justice system, while working within our respective mandates.

Governments do not have all the answers, nor can we do all that is needed. We could not have come this far without the support and involvement of many people. First, we-and society in general-owe a debt to victims who, despite their own deep personal loss, have brought both reasonable and passionate arguments to help build a justice system that is more sensitive to victims' needs.

Those who work with victims' services and advocacy groups have also provided valuable advice to us about the practical and specific needs of victims. And we depend on the support of countless police officers, other law enforcement officials, victim-witness assistants, and social and health care workers who are on the front lines. All of these people deserve our heartfelt gratitude.

Everyone has a role to play if we are to succeed in changing attitudes, raising awareness, and meeting the basic needs of victims of crime. Together, we will create a justice system that is more accessible and fair-a justice system that reflects the values of all Canadians. While there are many new challenges ahead, I am inspired by the progress that has been made to date, and I believe we are on the right track.

By sharing our knowledge, ideas, and experiences at this conference, we will continue towards our common goal of giving victims a voice that is heard and respected. My department is well-represented at this conference and I am confident that we will learn a great deal. We will return to our work with new ideas and renewed enthusiasm.

The conference agenda is an ambitious one, with a program full of challenging issues to explore. Over the next few days, participants will remind us and criticize us as they share their stories and depict the manner in which they were dealt with by the police, Crown, courts, victim services, and government officials. I look forward to hearing your views. Yours are the voices that must be heard.

I extend my thanks to all of you who are here to share your expertise and knowledge. Victims of crime, victim advocates, victim witness assistants, police, Crown Attorneys, and all those who work with victims of crime have a difficult and challenging role. Your work and dedication is greatly valued and appreciated. On behalf of the Department of Justice, I commend your courage and salute your steadfast determination to bring about change.

Thank you.

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